

A Lifestyle of Thanksgiving (Luke 17:11-19)

We read the story too quickly, I think. Let's slow it down, and picture it. We start with ten men who have the worst disease of their day. And, I think we gain a new appreciation of how bad this disease must have been in Jesus' time. It wasn't just the grotesque physical damage, or the attack to our sight. It wasn't just the loud cries, the attack to our hearing. It was also the smell of rotting, decaying flesh, overwhelming even our sense of smell.

But today's readings are about lepers, not leprosy; about people, not the characteristics which threaten to define them. Jesus meets these men walking in the middle ground between Samaria and Galilee...that's where the lepers would find themselves, outcast from both the Samaritans and the Jews of Galilee.

The emotional pain of a leper must have been even worse than the physical pain. What would it have been like to have been removed from friends and family for a lifetime, and to have been forced to announce that removal on a daily basis? It must have been horrible to be removed from family and from community with no contact with children or grandchildren. He would not have been allowed to kiss his spouse goodbye fearing that she would become afflicted with the disease.

Lepers tended to roam together, looking for food, begging for assistance from a great distance, learning to yell in loud voices, both from the need to warn others, and to beg for help from across the way.

In this account, ten men encounter Jesus, and hear him say the most unusual thing. "We want to be well!" they scream at Jesus. And Jesus responds, "Go and show yourselves to the priest."

The purpose of visiting a priest after a cure was so the cured person could officially resume his place in society. The nine lepers, presumably Jewish, had their minds on the future, on resuming the life they had left behind with the onset of illness. If the priest gave the OK, they would be pronounced healed!

They look down at their bodies. The hands of one man are still mangled. Another man looks at his leg, which ends with a filthy rag at the knee. Another looks at his skin, and finds it as repulsive as ever.

None of these men were any better off than they had been ten minutes earlier, when they had first spotted the famous teacher. And yet, they headed off in search of the priests. And on their way, they were healed. On their way, a hand reappeared, and tingled with life. A crutch tripped on a filthy rag, as it fell to the ground. The leg was back, healthy, whole, complete...the skin cleared. One looked at the other, another looked at the rest, and the screaming started. The smiles broke into cheering and they raced off in the distance, not believing that the nightmare was finally over.

The miracle must have been astounding. You can imagine them all of a sudden, all ten of them just looking at each other and saying, "Whoa..." They wouldn't see it in themselves as quickly as they would see it of someone else and then it would dawn on them what happened. This is a shocking, riveting, compelling, amazing moment and it is defined as they were cleansed. From the top of their heads to the soles of their feet the leprosy was gone and they were back whole.

The one who comes back to give thanks probably knows this Jesus was more than a healer...that somehow he had always been in charge of his life.

"Where are the other nine?" Jesus asked. Jesus said, "Go, and show yourselves to the priests. Jesus never commanded that any of them express thankfulness to God, or return to him, the healer. Nevertheless, that is what Jesus expected.

"One of them, when he saw he was healed..." This guy was all patched up. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? And Jesus says to this very thankful man, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

The others don't have any interest in Jesus anymore. They got what they wanted out of Him. They're very shallow, very superficial. They have no desire to worship Him, no desire to glorify Him, no desire to thank Him.

They're looking for somebody who will feed them free food. They're looking for somebody who will heal all their diseases. They'll take that, they'll take the food, they'll take the healing, they'll take all that but they don't want anything else.

This one man knew he needed a Savior. He knew he had come face-to-face with God and his soul was traumatized. He knew he was a sinner, but he knew that God had showed him mercy and compassion, kindness, power. He could process the implications of what had just happened. The others, hard-hearted, impenitent, satisfied with themselves; sought nothing more from Jesus.

Today, we've all touched more people in an hour than this man had touched in years. We've been close to friends, or family. Or maybe a child has been in your lap, or a hug met you at a door. Maybe it was a firm handshake from a former friend.

Not this guy. He longed for a loving touch more than he longed for food. More than he needed water, he needed love. And before he was healed, while there was still a tremendous risk, Jesus was willing to give him that touch.

No abuse has scarred any of us so badly that Jesus won't touch us. Jesus is willing to lovingly touch us, hold us, and restore us. No sin has made us unlovable. Jesus is willing to call us all his friends, and stand beside us always. No fear has disqualified us. No problem has put our lives on hold. No failure has negated his love for us. No exceptions, no qualifications, no doubts...Jesus loves each of us – without condition.

And how do we react when we are given something we have asked for in prayer? Do we receive the gift and then lose interest in Jesus when we've gotten what we wanted out of Him. Are we remembering what should be our 'attitude of gratitude? Is our desire to give thanks as strong as that one leper who returned to Jesus glorifying God?

Gratitude to God is crucial to wholeness of mind, body and spirit, to what the New Testament calls "salvation." To be made well, we must add thanksgiving to our faith. Gratitude keeps us connected with the giver of the gift...with God. Gratitude keeps us grounded in the value of the gift. Perhaps, when we acknowledge the source of love, we more likely to share it with others. Maybe that is why gratitude is important enough for Jesus to lament its lacking in the other nine.

And for all the gifts we have received, O God, may we be truly thankful.

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